

Renowned Mormon composer, Tabernacle organist Cundick dies

BY TAD WALCH
DESERET NEWS

SALT LAKE CITY — Renowned Salt Lake Tabernacle organist Robert M. Cundick, who died Thursday at age 89, accompanied the Mormon Tabernacle Choir for 27 years, but he was much more than a musician and composer.

Cundick frequently said his biggest contributions happened away from the Tabernacle organ's bench, and although he retired 25 years ago, the work he did to upgrade instruments and facilities and to establish important concert series on two continents will ensure that his legacy will be felt for decades to come at the Tabernacle and the Assembly Hall on Temple Square, the BYU Jerusalem Center and the Joseph Smith Memorial Building in downtown Salt Lake City.

"I feel that my most meaningful efforts have occurred off, rather than on, the organ bench," he said in May during a celebration of the 50th anniversary of his appointment as a Tabernacle organist. "They were never included in my job description. I saw obvious needs and spearheaded projects to meet them. I was indeed fortunate to be the right man at the right time to accomplish this."

Cundick spearheaded a major restoration and upgrade of the Tabernacle organ, and he proposed a new organ for the Assembly Hall in 1980. After the proposal was approved, inspectors found problems with the Hall's attic trusses. Cundick first campaigned to save the Hall, then acted as the lead designer of the new organ during renovation.

"If you know where to look," said another longtime organist and friend, John Longhurst, "you can find Bob's fingerprints all over this venerable building."

When the Assembly Hall renovation was complete, Cundick launched the Temple Square Concert Series there. The series grew to become what is now known as Temple Square Performances, with several hundred performances each year utilizing all the buildings on greater Temple Square.

Cundick earned bachelor's and master's degrees at the University of Utah, where he also earned the first Ph.D. in music in state history. He taught at the U., then at BYU before LDS Church President David O. McKay called him to be the Hyde Park Chapel organist in London in 1962. He gave daily recitals for two years and performed concerts at St. Paul's Cathedral and King's College, Cambridge.

In 1965, Cundick was appointed Mormon Tabernacle organist. He played for the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and its weekly broadcast for 27 years.

"For any Mormon organist, the pinnacle of achievement is



Robert Cundick attends a concert in his honor at the Assembly Hall on May 9, 2015. LAURA SEITZ, DESERET NEWS

to sit at that bench," he said in a 2004 Deseret News profile. "I was no different. When the call came, I was elated — for about a week. Then reality set in."

The problem with a weekly, year-round program, he said, is that you're never done. "It was like being in a never-ending basketball season," he said. "The minute one game is out of the way, the next one is up."

After he retired from the Tabernacle organ, he and his

wife were called to serve at the BYU Jerusalem Center, where he organized a concert series that continues today.

Cundick composed two hymns that appear in the current hymnbook of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — "That Easter Morn" and "Thy Holy Word."

Cundick also composed an oratorio, "The Redeemer," that was performed and recorded by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and the Orchestra at Temple Square

in 2008. The BYU-Idaho Choirs and Orchestra will perform "The Redeemer" at the Tabernacle on March 18

as part of the Sacred Music Series.

He also was known as a fix-it man and a fisherman. And a family man. He and his wife Cholly have five children, 23 grandchildren and 38 great-grandchildren.

In his testimony on the Mormon Scholars Testify website, Cundick recounted a conversation with a noted professional violinist from New York. The violinist wistfully contrasted his world-centered life with Cundick's spiritually centered life, saying, "You've had it all!"

Services will be held at noon on Wednesday at the Wilford Stake Center, 1765 E. 3080 South. A viewing is scheduled at Larkin Sunset Lawn Mortuary, 2350 E. 1300 South, on Tuesday from 6 to 8 p.m. and at the stake center from 10:30 to 11:45 a.m. In lieu of flowers the family requests donations to The Performing Arts Endowment Fund, c/o Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square, SLC, UT 84150. Condolences can be shared at www.larkinmortuary.com.

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